

# The Modern Ibo Woman

Colonialism may have brought some good to the Ibos, such as formal education and the ushering of Ibo men and women into the realm of world affairs and economy. But it threw traditional Ibo society and its system of thought into a state of disequilibrium. As one Ibo man states, "The white man took a relatively functional world and turned it upside down. The society which our ancestors had created worked for us. The new one created by the British simply does not work."<sup>143</sup> Modern Ibo society is simply a world of confusion, of conflicting ideals and beliefs. "The people's ultimate aim, it seems, has become a quest for individual survival,"<sup>144</sup> notes Ibo historian Felix Ekechi.

## Political Changes

One important legacy of colonization that affects the lives of women is what the historian Nkiru Nzegwu describes as "the apathy of modern Igbo women toward political activity."<sup>145</sup> Contemporary Ibo society denies women active political participation. Women can vote; they can help men run for political office. But they do not hold leadership positions. "One would have expected modern Ibo women to rise up and demand their political rights the way their mothers and grandmothers had done," says anthropologist Kaneme Okonjo.

But the caliber of modern Ibo woman is different from her past ancestors. Most of

them accept their secondary, subservient status without much thought. They appear unconcerned about issues with wider political and social implications.<sup>146</sup>

What is the reason for this sense of political apathy found among modern Ibo women? Why do they appear more politically complacent than their foremothers?

## Economic Changes

Why modern Ibo women are politically apathetic may be explained by their new economic realities. When the British sent women home to be good wives and mothers during the colonial rule, they never told the women how they were to survive economically. While the men, for the most part, enjoyed their newfound public power, few were willing to take on the traditional economic responsibility of the women. Moreover, the meager income earned by men was not enough to provide adequately for the needs of the family without help from the women. Thus women, stripped of public power, barred from active and productive participation in the new economic system, still had the responsibility of feeding their children and other members of their families. "It has not been an easy task," says an Ibo mother of six. "We have no time for anything else. All we can afford to think about is how to feed our children."<sup>147</sup>



Comparatively, the economic life of contemporary Ibo women has regressed rather than improved since precolonial times. At least precolonial Ibo women farmed their land and were able to provide food and comfort for their family with the help of their husbands and children. Today, most women have to go it alone. Modern Ibo men, says Peter C. Lloyd, an anthropologist, "suffer a sense of dissociation from the land. They maintain an attitude of repulsion from manual work."<sup>148</sup> Rather than staying in their native villages to cultivate the land, they migrate to the cities

and towns looking for work and supposedly better ways of life. Most of them often leave their wife (or wives) and children in the villages to fend for themselves as best they can.

For the women left in the villages (approximately half of Ibo women), life is relatively difficult. They sustain themselves through subsistence farming. "But the joys and jokes that had attended work on the farm in pre-colonial times have been replaced by worn, tired faces," says Professor T. Nwala. "Work has simply become a way of expressing life and the desire to continue living."<sup>149</sup>



*A child bows before the king (right) and prime minister (left) of the Ibo people living in Onitsha, Nigeria. As a result of colonization, women are no longer able to hold political office.*



## City Life

Women who migrate to the cities and towns alone, or with their husbands, acknowledge that abandoning the agricultural life in the village does not lessen their economic hardships. Of course, those fortunate to have received formal education can live better lives, as they are able to find employment in the public sector as nurses, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. But the colonial legacy that favored men's education over women's means that relatively few women occupy these positions. The gap between men and women in the public economic sector is still very wide.

The discrepancies in education force most urban women to become self-employed. The fortunate ones acquire money from their families and start vocational businesses like tailor

shops, restaurants, beauty salons, or small grocery stores. But since opening a vocational business requires huge capital, few women have the opportunity to open a business.

This leaves many women with the option of becoming petty traders. "Petty trading has become a normal feature of modern Iboland," writes Victor Uchendu. "Women hawk small items like bread, groundnuts (peanuts), bananas or fruits."<sup>150</sup> Some women carry the items in large trays and move from place to place in search of buyers. Others prefer to set up a table in front of their homes or on highways and sell the products to passersby. The reality for these women is that they work long hours for relatively little profit. "When the economic lives of modern Ibo women are evaluated," says Robin McKown, an anthropologist,



*Today many urban Ibo women work as petty traders, selling food and trinkets to passersby.*



poverty and hunger [are] a reality for many families. There is hunger in the rural villages where subsistence farming is left to women and old people. There is hunger in the cities where many workers can not earn enough money to properly feed their large families or pay for their children's school fees.<sup>151</sup>

## The Family

The changes in the political and economic lives of contemporary Ibo women have also affected traditional family values and relationships. "The face of the Ibo traditional family has changed tremendously," states Lucy Onyekwere, an Ibo mother. "The Ibo traditional extended family unit is still recognized. But more and more Ibos are forming nuclear families."<sup>152</sup> This is primarily a result of the people's gradual abandonment of polygamy, condemned by the Christian faith, as well as the mass migration to the cities. Whereas in the past a typical family consisted of a man, his wives, his sons, his sons' wives, and unmarried and divorced daughters, today a typical Ibo family consists of a man, his wife, and many children.

The shift from extended to nuclear family units has created serious problems that threaten the core of Ibo society. "As men and women move to towns and focus on their single family units, their relationship with their descent groups inevitably weakens. As familial bond weakens, so does loyalty to one's family,"<sup>153</sup> says historian Peter Lloyd. Most Ibos express dismay at the disintegration of Ibo family life promoted by the loss of strong extended family relationships. "People have lost their sense of sharing and belonging," the Ibos complain. A newly married Ibo woman, Uchenna Adigha, describes how she has

## The Disintegration of Ibo Extended Family Life

*One of the legacies of colonization is the disintegration of the extended family unit. Simon Ottenberg, in "Ibo Receptivity to Change," describes how the Ibos leave their close-knit villages and move to the cities, where they eventually lose traditional family values.*

"The larger unilineal descent groups [extended families], so characteristic a feature of Ibo society, are becoming less important as lineage and clan members leave home on a temporary or permanent basis, as traditional agriculture—normally under lineage and clan control—comes to play a less vital role in Ibo economy, and as belief in ancestral spirits gives way to Christianity. In turn, the importance of the smaller family groupings as social and economic units is increasing. These changes in kinship organization are most noticeable in the urban centers but are also occurring in the rural areas."

never met her uncle who lives in a city in northern Nigeria: "He did not even care to attend my wedding, even after several messages had been sent to him."<sup>154</sup>

The changes in the traditional family structure have not improved the social lives of Ibo women. Small families and monogamous marriages have apparent advantages, such as eliminating jealousies between co-wives and giving men and women the opportunity to develop single loving relationships. But, for the most part, the changes seem to stifle and confine women. As Christina, an Ibo grandmother, notes, "The modern marriage is a prison."<sup>155</sup>





*Modern husbands and wives often try to combine both traditional Ibo and contemporary Western values, beliefs, and customs into their marriages.*

Shifting family values have created tensions between men and women. Husband-wife relationships seem to follow a quasi-Western pattern that reflects the confusion of a people trying to mix two cultural ideals. Men seem to be uncertain about the type of relationship they want. "They try to adapt traditional values to those they have acquired through contact with the West and what results are conflicting expectations,"<sup>156</sup> notes Lloyd. For example, while the achievements of "an aggressive, vo-

cal woman" are admirable, silence and subordination are promoted as ideal female behaviors. While they may respect a woman with advanced education, most Ibo men still do not want their wives to become "too educated." It is a common belief that "too much education spoils the woman and makes her uncontrollable." As an Ibo woman notes in frustration, "Present-day Ibo society does not know what it expects from its women. It gives conflicting messages."<sup>157</sup>